

The Profile: John Broome

The philosophy of value, the value of mathematics

The moral philosopher and economist John Broome of Corpus Christi College Oxford has written on the ethics of climate change

Let's start with your background – how has it shaped you?

I am a colonial child. My parents were British but worked in Malaysia. I was born in Kuala Lumpur. When I was eight, I was sent to boarding school in Britain. I went to Rugby School and then to Cambridge. This was a privileged education, but also very miserable at times. I emerged with the typical attitudes of the British public-school boy.

All that was turned on its head when I went to graduate school at MIT. It was the time of Vietnam War protests. The faculty and students of MIT went on strike. We had huge demonstrations, and the streets of Cambridge (Mass.) were taken over by riots. I became a socialist.

What brought you to economics, and then philosophy?

Economics: mainly by accident. I went to Cambridge to study mathematics. I learnt many things that would later be useful, including linear algebra and real analysis, which taught me the value of rigorous argument. Still, I was bored by the first-year mathematics course and decided to change to some different subject. I toured the available subjects, asking college tutors for advice. A philosophy tutor told me that, rather than studying philosophy, I would do better to leave the university and work on the roads for some years. But the economists welcomed me and I went to them.

I was lucky enough to be supervised at Cambridge by Jim Mirrlees. He advised me to apply to MIT to take a PhD. There, my mathematics continued to be useful, and allowed me to write a thesis on general equilibrium very quickly, once I realized that the thesis I started writing on the anarchist philosopher William Godwin would not be well received.

While at MIT, I went to lectures at Harvard on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, given by the inspirational philosopher Stanley Cavell. These lectures brought me to philosophy. Because of them, when I returned to Britain I took an MA in philosophy. However, I subsequently worked as an economist for almost 25 years before I got my first full-time job in philosophy.

I have now been a philosopher longer than I was an economist. But my experience in economics influences my philosophy. I know the value that formal, even mathematical, arguments can have in analysing many subjects that have a quantitative aspect. These include subjects within moral philosophy – among them the value of equality, the value of human life, and population ethics, which is about the value of adding people to the world's population. I am sometimes irritated by philosophers who think they can work on these subjects without using mathematics. I spent the first part of my career trying to make some aspects of economics more philosophical. Now I try to make some aspects of philosophy more mathematical.

Is there a book or paper that you would recommend to all our readers?

The paper that has played the biggest role in my academic life is John Harsanyi's 'Cardinal welfare, individualistic ethics, and interpersonal comparisons of utility'. Harsanyi showed that apparently anodyne assumptions, which say nothing about additivity, imply the remarkably strong conclusion that value has an additive structure. This theorem supplies the basis of the best argument for the utilitarian theory of value, and also for its cousin the prioritarian theory. Since these are among the most popular theories of value, Harsanyi's paper is crucial in moral philosophy. This is not enough to recommend Harsanyi's paper to all your readers, but it does give it a central position in the interface between economics and moral philosophy.

Have you read something recently that has altered your thinking?

Fifteen years ago I received a letter from Duncan Foley, who supervised me when I was a student at MIT. It changed my thinking about how climate change can be controlled. Up to that time, I had assumed, like most people, that we had to persuade the current generation to make some sacrifices for the sake of future generations. The world has conspicuously failed in this attempt at persuasion; emissions of greenhouse gas are still rising. Duncan pointed out that economics tells us that an externality can be corrected in a way that requires no sacrifice from anyone. I now think we should devote our efforts to finding a way of dealing with climate change without asking anyone to make a sacrifice. Possibly that approach might succeed.

Do you have a favourite among your publications? Is there one you would like to be better known?

I'd like all my publications to be better known. My best books are *Weighing Goods* and *Rationality Through Reasoning*. Just now I'm more attached to *Rationality Through Reasoning*, just because it's more recent and better reflects my current interest in normativity. But that book has little connection with economics. On the other hand, *Weighing Goods* is part of my project of applying formal methods from economics to moral philosophy.

What makes you pessimistic about the world, and what optimistic?

I am pessimistic because, more than thirty years since the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change came into force, emissions of greenhouse gas are still growing. Also, my fear of climate change has recently been overtaken by the even greater threat created by the rise of demagogues around the world. I fear their warlike inclinations.

The election of Donald Trump – a demagogue who denies climate change – makes it very hard to find a reason for optimism.

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